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Cultural Ambivalence: A Socio-Historical Account of the Berava Caste of Southern Sri Lanka

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Abstract

One of the essential features of the caste systems of South Asia is its link with occupational activity. In the Sri Lankan caste system, which evolved out a system of feudal service tenures linked to royal courts and Buddhist temples, the link with occupation is particularly strong. In this chapter we focus on the Berava or drummer caste with particular reference to southern Sri Lanka. Within the traditional social order, the Berava, on account of their occupational identity, have been given a lowly position and have suffered much discrimination and opprobrium. Yet, members of this caste have played a key role in the performance of rituals in which drumming is required. Based on historical and ethnographic evidence we offer an account of the ambivalent relationship between caste, ritual knowledge, performance and nationalism as it has changed over time.

Keywords

Caste, Caste Discrimination, Traditions, Social and Cultural Change, Ethnicity, Nationalism

Introduction

This article is based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in southern Sri Lanka by the authors among members of the Berava or drummer caste. Carried out between the late 1970's and the mid-1990's, De Silva's fieldwork took place in and around Bentara during the mid-1990s among Berava communities in the Bantara River valley and focused on their ritual practices (de Silva, 2000). Simpson's doctoral fieldwork was done between 1979-80 among Berava communities in villages and hamlets in the Nilwala valley north of Galle. His completed thesis described how ritual knowledge and skills were passed back and forth between Berava families. In short, both researchers

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immersed themselves in the traditions of ritual knowledge and skill that were, at that time, the rich inheritance of these communities. The label 'Berava' associates the caste with the hereditary occupation of drumming but the families that we came to know were adept at a wide range of skilled and creative cultural activities including dancing, astrology, mask-making, creating ritual structures out of plant materials [*gok kalāva*], and making images of deities [*deva*] and demons [*yakā* or *yakku*] out of mud [*rūpa*] for various rituals as well as statues for Buddhist temples. They were also in command of a significant oral tradition of poems and incantations that enabled men from the caste to perform rituals and ceremonies to bring relief and protection to those facing the inexorable facts of death, decay and disorder. Yet, despite their extraordinary talents and skills, there seemed to be something of a contradiction in place. Whilst their daily work placed them at the heart of ritual and artistic production across the island, members of the caste occupied a lowly place in the caste hierarchy of Sinhalese society and, accordingly, were subject to the oppression and opprobrium that comes with this status.[1] Indeed, the drum, the essential symbol of their oppression, figures in almost all ritual that takes place in Sri Lankan society. Without the drum there can be no ritual or ceremony. Our main objective in this article is to explore the social, political and economic drivers that underpin the contradictory juxtaposition of valorization and opprobrium experienced by the caste. In the final section of the article, we bring this contradiction up to date, so to speak, with a brief reflection on the more recent situation of members of the Berava caste.

Our way into the contradiction is via the concept of ambivalence. The term refers to a state in which strong but conflicting reactions, feelings, beliefs and attitudes are held simultaneously.[2] Ambivalence is clearly an attitude that is experienced but it is also one that is felt towards someone or something. It is this relational aspect of ambivalence that we are keen to explore in our account—ambivalence towards what, felt by whom and for what reason? We focus on ambivalence in three sets of relations: society towards the Berava; the state towards the Berava and the Berava towards their own traditional inheritance. A further concept we would like to weave into the account is that of temporality. Ambivalence is not a static state but one that is finely tuned to the kaleidoscope of historical circumstance. The sources and constituents of ambivalence shift as different social and political realities have to be negotiated. In our account, we have tried to keep attuned to the wider landscapes in which day-to-day social and cultural life play out.

The period covered by our research was approximately 1978-1995. This was a tumultuous period in Sri Lankan history but, arguably, no less tumultuous than the periods that immediately preceded or followed it. In 1977, J.R Jayawardene was elected President following a landslide victory for the United National Party (UNP). With a strong mandate and little by way of opposition he embarked on a neoliberal transformation of the nation. Beneath a thin veneer of Buddhist morality and an

[1]This contradiction has been highlighted by numerous commentators, for example Kapferer, 1983, p. 54; Reed, 2010, p. 169; and Esler, 2024, p. 386.

[2]Word derives from Latin ambi- 'on both sides' and valentia 'strength'.

attempt to create a righteous, that is, a 'Dharmista' society, lay a solid core of self-interested entrepreneurship and wealth creation based on open and unregulated markets. By the early 1980s, portents of trouble ahead were beginning to appear for the Jayawardene regime. The economic miracles promised did not materialize for the rural masses of the country. Disquiet was also fomenting among the Tamil community. The government's response to both expressions of discontent was one of growing authoritarianism. In 1983, a period of serious instability began following the alleged rape of three Tamil schoolgirls in Jaffna by Sri Lankan soldiers. This was followed by the killing of thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which triggered a pogrom in July 1983, which left up to 3000 Tamils dead and 150,000 displaced (Piyadasa, 1984). Growing instability in one of its closest neighbors led the Indian government to coerce the Sri Lankan government into accepting an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987. The intervention proved to be disastrous, and the region descended into all-out war. After heavy losses, the IPKF withdrew in 1990. The imposition of the IPKF and the violation of Sri Lankan sovereignty that this was seen to represent proved to be a powerful recruiting tool for the socialist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The JVP, routed during their 1971 uprising, had re-emerged as a nationalist movement appealing to rural and disenfranchised youth and championing Buddhism and Sinhala patriotism. Many young people joined the JVP in their campaign of strikes, disruption and guerilla warfare. The JVP took on the mantle of protectors and liberators of the 'motherland' and the saviors of Sinhala culture. However, as their campaign to overthrow the state gathered momentum, their methods became more violent and indiscriminate. This aspect of their strategy played an important role in the downfall of the second JVP insurrection (1987-89). The response of the state was swift and brutal and amidst a catastrophic loss of life the insurrection was brought to an end.

The liberalization of the economy under the right wing United National Party, the opening up of the economy to global capitalist forces, and other factors exacerbated crises of social and political control for the government. The escalation of civil war between the government of Sri Lanka and separatist Tamil Tigers paved the way to a deepening of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist sentiment. Furthermore, the post-liberalization period removed many of the barriers that kept the country in a situation of relative isolation from global social, cultural, political, and economic processes. Elections in 1994 saw the Peoples' Alliance (led by the SLFP) come to power, pledging an end to the war and a negotiated peace with the separatist LTTE, a commitment to clean, transparent and democratic governance, and advocacy of pro-poor economic policies. In the political sphere, it may even have outdone its predecessor in election-rigging and political corruption. It soon became clear that the pro-war lobby was powerful enough to ensure no concessions were made that could have led to negotiations for peace. By the end of the period that we cover in this article there was a seemingly irresistible downward slide into chronic and protracted political, economic and social crises.

The bigger historical picture is important for the account we develop below. On the one hand, these events had a significant impact on the ritual practices of the Berava.

For example, de Silva points out that there has been a strong current of opinion which argues that the breakdown of kinship and village-based social organization, including caste, entails a concomitant decline in ritual performance (for example, see Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). De Silva (2000), on the contrary, argues that rituals have not declined but instead have changed their goals and orientations. Indeed, he found that, among the Berava, a remarkable resilience was evident, notwithstanding the intrusion of neoliberal forces into Sri Lankan society following the opening up of the economy in 1978. Although these forces have undermined some aspects of communal and caste-based healing rituals, an active sense of cultural nationalism has worked to preserve 'traditions' and has even acted as a counter to the local impacts of global forces. So, on the one hand, healing rituals [*tovil*], have been drastically scaled down and privatized, on the other, they have emerged as self-conscious, cultural markers of national heritage and are regularly incorporated into cultural shows for mass audiences (de Silva, 2000). Simpson describes a similar transformation because of the banning of large gatherings during the 1980s insurrection. During this time, public healing rituals came under this ban and consequently were replaced by smaller scale ones carried out indoors and with fewer personnel (Simpson, 1997). Like de Silva, he also notes that the ritual practices of the Berava and other similar groups such as the Navandanno [blacksmiths], because of the caste's connection with the past, have played a significant role in cultural politics nationally. In short, in the period in the run-up to independence and thereafter, the cultural capital of the Berava acquired a strategic significance. At various points, performance and performers deemed 'traditional' have been valorized as representing a link with an authentic, pre-colonial past and as such used as a reference point for contemporary Sinhala national identity.[3] As we show in the section dealing with the ambivalence of members of the Berava caste towards their own heritage, the tension has been resolved for recent generations by a growing detachment from their own traditions. For them, the detachment provides a route to caste anonymity and the social mobility that this allows.

Ambivalence I: Society towards the Berava

The Sinhalese caste system has proved something of a puzzle for scholars of South Asia society and culture.[4] Unlike its Indian counterpart, there are no Brahmin or Kshatriya castes and it does not carry the same rigidity around ideas of purity and pollution. It also differs in that the most elevated caste, the Goyigama, or farmer caste is also the largest in numerical terms. Below the Goyigama are a cluster of smaller, service castes who are ranked below the Goyigamas in the Sinhala caste hierarchy. The social and economic marginality of the service castes was often reinforced by numerous social proscriptions and markers. For example: they were frequently without hereditary

[3]In his account of cultural intimacy, Herzfeld (1997) makes a similar point: Marginals are often subject to a profound ambivalence. On the one hand they are celebrated as a pure expression of an authentic identity but on the other they are denigrated because they fail to satisfy modern expectations regarding values and behaviour.

[4]For an interesting discussion and overview on caste research in Sri Lanka see Esler, 2024.

land title, had to follow a system of caste-specific family and personal names, had unavoidable service obligations towards higher status groups, faced restrictions on dress and appearance and were subject to subtle patterns of deference and demeanor in their day-to-day inter-caste social interaction. Estimates of the numbers who identify as members of the various service castes are notoriously difficult to arrive at. Caste as a category has not been identified in censuses since 1911 and anti-discrimination legislation over the decades has rendered caste even more demographically opaque (Silva et al., 2009). Based on the limited data available to them, Silva, Sivapragasam & Thanges estimated that about 20 to 30 per cent people in Sri Lanka are victims of caste-based discrimination which may serve as a rough proxy for the overall proportion of service castes present in Sri Lanka. Among these castes, the Berava are considered one of the lowest ranked and are one of the most numerous. In the southern part of the island, however, they constitute a small fraction of the total caste-identified population (Ryan, 1953, p. 291). More recently, Kapferer notes that in both urban and rural Sri Lanka, the Berava are viewed by other castes as close to the bottom of the caste order (1983, pp. 38-48). Their low rank is generally related to the nature of their ritual duties. A reason often cited by non-Berava people as a justification for the caste being positioned in the lower orders of society was that Berava men's hereditary occupation of drumming at rituals and ceremonies brought them into routine contact with the skins of dead animals on their drums. Killing animals is abhorred within mainstream Buddhism and by extension, handling the products of this act are linked by some Buddhists with impurity on the one hand and impiety on the other. Their status is also linked to their role as providing ritual services to most of the other castes. These duties typically bring Berava ritualists and their families into contact with lower beings in the cosmic order such as demons and spirits [*yaksha* and *bhuta*] which further reinforces the low status of the caste.[5] The logic underpinning this association is to be found in the hierarchical ordering of the Buddhist pantheon. The system operates according to jurisdictions (*varama*) held by gods over cosmic territories. These gods then bestow power on lesser deities and demons. As Obeyesekere has argued, this vision of the cosmic order serves as a model of, and a model for, the social organization of Lankan kingdoms (Obeyesekere, 1984). Throughout history, distinct caste groups were formed in accordance with the sort of ritual and other services they provided in royal and religious ceremonials as well as domestic rites. In addition to the Berava, the main service castes still found in the south of Sri Lanka today are as follows: metalworkers (Navandanno), lime burners (Hunu), palanquin bearers (Batgama), potters (Badahalla), washermen (Hena or Rada) and jaggery makers (Vahumpura).

Today, some of the ancient structures of feudal social organization are still evident. Historically, Sinhala Buddhist-dominated Sri Lanka fell into three culturally distinct regions: The 'upcountry' or Uda Rata, embraces the traditions of the central province; the 'low-country' or Pahata Rata, includes the traditions of the districts of Galle, Matara and Hambantota in the southern province, and the Sabaragamuwa tradition refers to the

[5]The use of the term 'low' here is in keeping with the terminology in common usage in Sinhala Buddhist society, that is, they are referred to as an *adu kulaya*.

arts developed in the central western region of Sri Lanka. In the history of Sri Lanka these regions emerged as ancient kingdoms and later provided the boundaries of the district authorities of the colonial administrations. The Berava caste communities in these regions have also developed distinct drumming and dancing traditions which are recognized through their ritual costumes as well as their technique, style and rhythm when performing (also see Sykes, 2018). These different traditions continue to provide important vehicles for regional identities in the present day. Indeed, the role of Berava men as performers in these areas continues to be important. Ancient patron/client structures of duties and loyalties have more recently been replaced by ones with local political elites and their strategic appeals to cultural heritage and its preservation.

Broadly speaking, Berava in their role as drummers fall into two categories: ritual drummers and funeral drummers. Ritual drummers could inherit land and sometimes be engaged in paddy cultivation as well as ritual service. From father to son, this traditional legacy has been passed down across the generations [*paramparāva*]. These drummers gave their services to temples, deity shrines and at communal rituals. Stylized bodily movements of the dancers are rhythmically controlled by the beat of the drum. The rhythmic harmony of the act is essential to the performance (Sykes, 2018). On certain ritual occasions, for example in Buddhist temples, the drums are beat without the accompaniment of dance. However, dance cannot be performed without the beating of the drums. The Berava provide the offerings of sound [*sabda pujā*] and dance in temple rituals and village rites. An important duty for Berava drummers and dancers is to participate in the large ceremonial processions in which sacred regalia are paraded [*perahera*]. As Seneviratne points out, even in the midst of this duty their status vis-a-vis other castes is made public:

> The very act of dancing in front of someone in certain contexts, of which the Perahera is one, places the dancers in a low position and the recipient of dance in a high position. This inequality is enhanced by the dancers worshipping the radala authorities every now and then in the moving Perahera, throughout its entire course. Further, during most of this course, the dancers also perform the remarkable feat of walking backwards from time to time, as much as they could while doing their dance too, another sign of honor accorded to a high-status person to whom one does not turn one's back. (1978, p. 151).

Unlike ritual drummers, the section of the Berava community involved with funeral drumming [*mala bera*] did not inherit land. Their association with the polluting effects of death and disposal marked them out as inferior, even within the caste. Whilst this hierarchical distinction was upheld inside the caste and ritual drummers would never undertake funeral drumming, it was of no consequence to outsiders. All Berava were seen as inferior by outsiders. The occupational identity of the Berava as the part of society where drummers are to be found is strong. By the time we carried out our fieldwork, many Berava men had never touched a drum. Nonetheless, the stigma attached to their profession, for both men and women, has persisted.

For several older Berava people that we worked with, the memories of caste oppression were still strong. Stories of exclusion, abuse and intimidation were common. By the time Simpson carried out his fieldwork in 1979, the most visible manifestations of caste prejudice had been greatly ameliorated through social and political activism. Berava men could now go about in public with their upper bodies covered and educational exclusion was mostly a thing of the past.[6] However, humiliating traces of caste prejudice were still in evidence. Rules that set the community apart such as prohibitions on marriage outside a person's caste or rules about who could sit together at a table to eat were still strongly observed. There was also the use of the 'half chair' [*putuva bāgaya*], a chair produced, as if from nowhere, on occasions when a Berava man visited the house of a Goyigama family. When all were seated, the Berava man would be head and shoulders below everyone else—but at least they had progressed from merely having to stand when in company. There were numerous occasions when out in public with his Berava associates Simpson also attracted opprobrium. Did he not realize that these people were low and 'dirty' [*kilutuyi*] and he shouldn't be fraternizing with them? What might appear to an outsider as a flat and featureless social landscape was in fact filled with clues about status that often translated into appalling acts of prejudice.

De Silva also witnessed caste-based discrimination against Berava people in the Bentara area. For example, members of the caste were often in dispute with the politically and numerically dominant Goyigama caste. One contentious issue was that of schooling. A major grievance was that antagonism from other castes caused Berava children to leave school earlier than they otherwise would have done. In response, members of the caste started their own primary school with the help of a Berava man with good connections to national political parties. Similarly, members of the caste were forced to have their own temple because of high caste control of the existing village temple.

Yet, despite evidence of sustained caste prejudice, the role of the Berava in the areas in which they lived was one that was valued when it came to the services that men of the caste provided. For example, in the event of illness or misfortune for which supernatural forces are believed to be responsible, family members would approach a local ritual specialist, typically of the Berava caste. They would visit their houses, drink their tea and eat their biscuits and be polite and solicitous. Where a healing ceremony [*tovil*] was the resulting prescription, a troupe of dancers and drummers [*kandāyama*] would later attend the house where the patient [*āturaya*] lived and the performers would be treated to food, drink and generally welcomed into the home. Social etiquette would be observed on these occasions, but the hosts would go to some

[6]The 'Battle of the Banian' is a now famous incident in which there was a violent confrontation between Goyigamas and Berava men over their children's right to wear vests in public. Ryan reports events taking place near Tangalle in 1949 (Ryan, 1953, pp. 292–293). Simpson's informants described similar events taking place in the 1960s, again sparked when a Berava child was assaulted in the street for going to school wearing a vest. S.A. Wickremasinghe, then Communist Party MP for Akuressa, was reported to have physically intervened in the confrontation and persuaded the Goyigama groups that their prejudices were unfair and unfounded.

lengths to ensure that their guests, although beneath them in the caste hierarchy, were not offended or slighted in any way. One reason for this apparent putting aside of caste concerns was the fact that those who had come to repel misfortune and its agents were also capable of doing the opposite. Their knowledge of sorcery and other nefarious techniques made them feared for the harm they might do if offended.

Ambivalence II: The State towards the Berava

In her book *Dance and the Nation: Performance Ritual and Politics in Sri Lanka* [2010] Susan Reed documents how the Kohomba Kankariya ritual was transformed from a small-scale village celebration of local deities into an ubiquitous and essential expression of Sinhalese national identity. Over the centuries the Kohomba Kankariya has served a range of functions: healing ritual, a way to fulfil a vow, an agricultural rite or simply fostering forgiveness and community solidarity. Crucially, the Kohomba Kankariya is associated with the up-country or Kandyan dance tradition. In the early twentieth century, Kohomba Kankariya dancers and drummers began to feature in the rituals that center on the Temple of the Tooth and as a part of the Esala Perahera procession (Reed, 2010, p. 99). Reed demonstrates how in the post-colonial period Kandyan dance became entwined with the political project of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. A critical moment in this development was SWRD Bandaranike's election in 1956. His success lay in his appeal to the Sinhala majority and the promise of a revitalization of the religion, culture and values that had atrophied under centuries of colonial rule. From this point onward there emerged a sense that Sinhala culture was unique and in need of protection. One of the first moves in this direction was the establishment of a Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1956. According to Mantillake (2022), the dances drawn from the different dance traditions of the island became part of the national curriculum in schools in the 1950s. He identifies the Berava dancer and drummer Pani Bharata as playing a significant role in creating an entire repertoire of dances that reinforced an emerging sense of Sinhala national identity. Although presented as authentic and pre-colonial, Mantilleke argues that these dances, which celebrated everyday village activities, are largely invented and were formulated in the ferment of cultural revival that followed independence. These shifts in cultural policy had wide-ranging consequences for performers and their modes of performance. Put simply, healing rituals performed by hereditary Berava specialists became increasingly oriented toward heritage and exhibition delivered by middle-class, non-Berava elites. Reed also documents other critical transformations. The dynamic variability of dance traditions became increasingly standardized and prescribed as a result of textbooks, manuals and exams. Performers from the Berava caste were gradually squeezed out of their ritual inheritance in favor of high-caste exponents (Reed, 2010, p. 136). The inclusion of dance at Ordinary Level, Advanced Level in schools and later at degree level added further impetus to the dislocation of performance from its roots. Woven into this story is an account of the impact of these changes upon up-country Berava ritualists and their communities.

Whilst the fate of the up-country Berava has been documented in some detail, little has been written about the situation in the low-country. Although sharing common caste status, up-country and low-country Berava have significantly different traditions. Low-country Berava have not enjoyed the same levels of recognition and state patronage as their up-country counterparts. Berava from the southern provinces, carry the tradition of low country dance (*pahata rata naetum*) and an associated complex of rituals intended to deal with the malign effects of demons (*tovil*). Some artists from this tradition did achieve national and international recognition but not nearly to the extent of their up-country compatriots. For example, Polwatte Gomez was recognized as a celebrity within the communities around the Galle and Matara on account of the fact that he had performed in Europe as part of a cultural tour. In 1980, when Simpson met him, he was quite elderly and cut a very elegant figure. He was well known in his community, almost everybody claimed to be related to him and, on family occasions, he was treated with nothing short of divine reverence. Similarly, Edin Gurunanse was one of the most respected and reputed teachers (*adura*) in Southern Sri Lanka. With his excellent reputation, Edin was in considerable demand from various groups of ritual performers and clients from all over the island. He even performed his dance routines in several European countries and his reputation was further enhanced after winning a number of awards. He was an acknowledged teacher and attracted numerous students. He also served as a visiting lecturer at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies which was later to become the University of Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA) in the capital city of Colombo.

Among Simpson's Berava associates back in 1978, it was also a source of great pride that a male relative had appeared at, or perhaps taught at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (*saundarya āyatanaya*). This was not only because of their caste background but also because low-country dance and drumming was often overlooked in favor of the more established and celebrated Kandyan dance traditions in State-sponsored institutions. Another source of pride for those involved in traditional arts and crafts was to be recognized with a Kala Bhushana. This entailed the award of a medal, a certificate and a small cash prize. Personal details and a photograph of those receiving the award also then appeared in a souvenir publication. The cover of the 1986 brochure shows a collage of drums, masks and ritual paraphernalia. Included among the items on the cover is an ola leaf book (*pus kola pot*) and stylus (*panhinda*). These books contain the poems (*kav*i) in which ritual instructions and their justification are to be found; these verses are jealously guarded and passed down in families. In 1988, the Kala Bushana, was awarded to Edin Gurunanse.

The Kala Bhushana was instigated in the mid-1980s as a way of recognizing local artists for their long service and significant contribution to the passing on of traditional knowledge and skills. The first Kala Bhushana event took place on 22 May 1984 at President J.R. Jaywardene's residence. At the inaugural event 53 temple artists, drummers, dancers and astrologers were feted. The date was significant as it coincided with National Heroes Day. In the 1980s the scheme was targeted explicitly at the grassroots carriers of traditional knowledge and skill. From the pictures in

the early brochures, many of the men were elderly and wearing the national dress. Perusal of the hereditary family names (*vāsagama*), which often contain clues as to caste identity, would suggest that several recipients were of the Berava and other low castes. When, on a subsequent field trip in the mid-90s, Simpson spent time with his Berava associates, they would proudly point to relatives who had been recognized by this prestigious national award. That those being recognized with the award were rather distant kin was not an issue. There were always rumblings about political bias in the selection of candidates, but the important point was that they were Berava and it was their traditional occupations that were being celebrated. In the foreword to the 1986 Kala Bhushana award brochure, President J.R Jayawardene joins three points crucial to the political ideology of his government. First, is an invocation of a link to the ancient kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and the twelfth century King, Parakramabahu. Second, the assertion that economic success is the foundation of national greatness. Third, that traditional Sinhala arts and crafts are crucial to this vision. At various points in the opening comments other ministers identify traditional knowledge and skills as integral to J.R. Jayawardene's vision of the Dharmista society, that is, one based upon an essentially Sinhala Buddhist conception of righteousness. Indeed, the patrons of the event repeatedly return to a link between the current impoverished morality of society and the way in which traditional art and artists have been neglected. The Kala Bhushana was thus a powerful way to reinforce the idea of a Dharmista society by enlisting and celebrating the purveyors of Sinhala cultural traditions as essential to it.

The award of the Kala Bhushana as state recognition of individual contribution to the arts continues but in more recent times its form is rather different. In 2017, the award was given to 200 people deemed to have made a significant contribution to contemporary culture. The difference between the early days of the award and the present day is threefold. There is recognition that the arts scene is ethnically diverse (although still dominated by Sinhalese), there is greater recognition of women's roles and there has been a shift towards literature, music and drama. This was no doubt a sign that the lifeblood of Sri Lankan public culture was now drawn from a rather different source than back in the 1970s.

During our periods of research, the cultural contribution of the Berava caste began to have greater economic significance with the growth of tourism as a foreign exchange earner. In response to the demand for souvenirs and local cultural performances, our networks of Berava ritualists began to provide their services to tourists. The influences of the tourist industry on Berava activity are particularly significant on the south-western coastal belt which is highly popular with tourists. Men of the caste would perform short versions of ritual episodes billed as 'authentic' and 'traditional' for visiting tourists. The remuneration from such activities was often considerably greater than that from their usual duties. Whereas once caste members carried out mask making, dancing, drumming, weaving and so forth as a matter of obligation under the system known as *rājakāriya* (duty to the king), their activities had taken on new significance as marketable commodities. For example, masks are no longer only

carved and painted for ceremonial use but also produced in direct response to the high tourist demand for these colorful items. When it comes to dancing, non-Berava and even non-Sri Lankans perform ritual episodes in tourist, diplomatic, and entertainment venues nationally and internationally (Reed, 2010; see also Simpson 1993 and 1997). Several local cultural shows that de Silva viewed during 1996–1997, were sponsored by 'idealists' who wished to preserve 'traditional arts' for coming generations (de Silva, 2000). The troupes performing in these events were invariably presented as 'authentic' traditional ritualists. Today, performers in the South experience both a State-governed renaissance of their ritual traditions and a gradual adoption of a market for their services as a result of tourism and migration. Together these form the drivers of much contemporary practice.

A further impact of State-level policy on local ritual practice is to be found in the field of education. Since the 1960s traditional ritual knowledge and skills have become progressively incorporated into formal educational curricula across all stages of education. The effect has been to standardize what were previously dynamic traditions. In 1978, the first problem that the government had to deal with when institutionalizing traditional ritual performance was that none of those who could teach dance had any higher educational background themselves. Most of them had not even finished O-level exams. The Ministry of Education solved the 'lack of qualification problem' among the teaching staff by honoring them with a university degree at the master's level and then employing them as university lecturers. The first generation of teachers were men of the Berava caste who had been initiated as dancers and drummers. Teachers also tended to be drawn from a small number of recognized masters who were mostly of the 'up-country' or Kandyan tradition (Reed, 2002). It was only much later that opportunities for low-country performers arose. With their new titles and positions came higher salaries and also an elevated social status. As Susan Reed notes, the trouble faced by traditional Berava ritualists in this situation led to tensions. In one group were the performers whose work was grounded in the community and closer to traditional service provision. In the other group were performers who were becoming cut off from their roots and whose performance was driven by a different aesthetic and economic rationality. The emphasis on theory and a more academic approach to music and dance meant that performers from higher castes were able to dominate the field (Reed, 1998, p. 261). Nevertheless, Reed reports that some Berava men, despite their lack of qualifications were able to make progress in the formal education sector. Consequently, the social status and public recognition of the Berava caste overall was improved. Furthermore, Berava men found success in a variety of new roles: as teachers at the university, dancers of nationally acclaimed traditional dances, members of national and provincial dance troupes, members of the Sri Lankan Army dance troupe, as judges at competitions held at the growing number of dance schools (*kalā yatana*) as members of the Arts Council, as well as the many opportunities created as teachers in public schools, dance schools and cultural centers established throughout the country under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

With the introduction of formal education criteria, the hereditary link between the Berava and their traditions of knowledge and skill were weakened, and it no longer gave them privileged access to state-level opportunities. The landscape of qualification and recognition had changed substantially. Protests were forthcoming from those in the Berava community who felt that they were being dispossessed of the intellectual property of their birthright. Many of those recruited to teach the traditional arts on the basis of their A-level exams in traditional arts alone had not come through an apprentice-type of education as dancers and what they were able to teach was thought to be distinctly second rate by those engaged in village ritual activity. With the aim of meeting these criticisms, the Institute of Aesthetic Studies established an exclusive entry based on a practical test on 1 May 1974 for ten talented students from the Berava community. The arrangement was highly contentious and, after one year, it was decided that everyone should be recruited on the basis of formal qualifications alone (Nurnberger, 1998). As a result, despite their claims to an authentic heritage, men of the Berava caste lost their demand for a more open access to the formalized education system. An important consequence of these developments was what Susan Reed has described as the 'classicization' and 'rationalization' of practices which 'once regarded solely as the province of low-caste Berava males became respectable within the context of Sinhala nationalism' (Reed, 2002, p. 247). In theory if not in actuality, this transformation of dancing and drumming signaled a sanitization of the 'traditional arts.' Many of the negative associations of Berava activity became recast as valuable and much lauded expressions of a national heritage to be shared by all Sri Lankans.

Ambivalence III: The Berava towards their Own Traditions

In the previous sections we have given some indication of the ambivalence which is expressed towards the Berava caste by society and state: a complex mixing of cultural valorization and social opprobrium. In this section we turn to the implications that this has had for the Berava in relation to their own traditions and heritage. Even though others might be slow to recognize the considerable contribution members of the caste made to Sri Lankan culture, they themselves would nonetheless take great pride in their own community and the preservation of its traditions. Key to the reproduction of tradition has been inter-marriage between families of performers. Intra-caste marriages enabled apprenticeships to take place, not only in ritual performance but also in a wide range of other artistic and craft skills. This system of exchange and co-operation between families was often cemented by marital alliances. Women invariably played a key role in these alliances and although they were not ritual practitioners themselves, it was clear to us that they were in regular contact with, and often had good knowledge of ritual practice. In short, for the highly visible work of Berava men to occur, the much less visible work of women was absolutely crucial. If men were the warp of tradition then women were its weft. The typical pattern was for women to move to the village of a husband known as a *dīga* marriage, and for her children to move back to her natal village to study with her kinsmen, and more often than not, one of her brothers,

that is, their maternal uncle (*mama*). Simpson argued that this close interweaving of marriage, apprenticeship and performance ensured the continued dynamism of the ritual tradition and its recognition in the wider community (Simpson 1984, 1993 and 1997). The practice of endogamy within groups of performance elites within the caste has contributed significantly to the emergence of distinct ritual traditions across the south of the island. For example, de Silva documents the distinctive features of the Bentara tradition. Berava ritualists from this area developed rites connected with the cult of the god Devol Deviyo. Propitiating this god is associated with relief of illness and meting out retribution for wrong doing. Yet, even within the region, the traditions relating to this deity are not homogenous. There are many families of ritual specialists involved in Devol Deviyo cults and each one exhibits minor variations in ritual procedures, style and repertoire. So, the closer one looks at tradition, the more its overall coherence dissolves, rather like a pointillist painting, into distinct and partial fragments.

In an attempt to understand this dynamic in practice, Simpson argued that the knowledge and skills of the Berava should be seen as cultural capital or, indeed, a kind of intellectual property. Like other kinds of intellectual property, knowledge and skills are owned with people claiming their legitimacy as its owners; here based on apprenticeship with named teachers (*gurunānse*) and a pedigree extending back in time (*paramparāva*). Value and prestige are maintained through mechanisms that limit access to the caste's patrimony. Paramount among these is the passing on of knowledge between kin and typically between an uncle and a nephew (*māma-baena*). Another mechanism in play is that of secrecy and avoidance of sharing knowledge indiscriminately. In this regard, one Berava associate described two classes of knowledge: an inner class (*aetul pantiya*) and an outer one (*pita pantiya*). The outer class is one that everyone has access to. For example, at the time of fieldwork much oral tradition had been collected and made into book form by a publishing house specializing in vernacular traditions—the Modern *Pot Sappuva* based in Nugegoda. Whilst this material was viewed as legitimate by many of our Berava associates, it was not considered to be workable in any practical setting. For that, 'inner' knowledge passed down by a teacher to his pupil was the only way ritual practice could have any efficacy. Such distinctions open up further sources of ambivalence. In claiming to be the carriers of a tradition which purports to be timeless and unchanging, male Berava ritualists are believed to reproduce ancient rituals as they were performed in the time of the ancients or in *illo tempore* as Mircea Eliade once referred to it (Eliade, 1954). Yet, in practice, each ritual performance is an occasion for innovation and dynamic creativity in which different strands of tradition are brought into play. Indeed, one could say in the passing on of knowledge and skills across the generations, tradition is better understood as the history of creativity rather than as a static and faithfully reproduced corpus. Given this tension, the market for ritual services that Berava men provide fosters competition within the caste. Jealousy is common as are allegations of others' inauthenticity and lack of proper knowledge or technique. It is not unknown for performers to steal items of performance from one another (*horamera*). The resulting

dynamism of the performance tradition in the south carries significant *kudos* for the caste within the wider society. However, the same claims also generate a tendency towards fission and tension between different groups within the caste.

The connections that members of the caste believe themselves to have with authentic sources of knowledge whilst providing the grounds for distinction is also a source of great pride. This pride was demonstrated in a poem recited to Simpson in 1979. The poem was shared with him by Arlis Gurunnanse of Walawe. He proudly claimed that it had been in his family for generations and he offered it as an account of the importance of the caste in terms of its origins and the role that its activities play in society.[7] For example, rather than using the term Berava, which associates them with the drum, they would often refer to themselves as the Nekati Kulaya, a designation which associates them with the more elevated profession of astrology.

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There are more parts to describe, duly divided according to their tasks,
Knowing the science of numbers and astrology, the effects of the planets
For the people with the *yaga* and to the accompaniment of the sound of drums
A kind of the artists maintained with gifts, descending from the Brahmin caste

And later …

මුතුන් මිත්තන් පටන්නොකඩව නැකැත් සත දැන සිටි	නිසා
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Since the time of ancestors continuously, they had known the science of astrology,
Remembering the science of numbers, two or three times, placing white shells
As they prescribed auspicious moments for marriages of women, offering *bali*
The great men of the Govi caste call them Nakatiya.

Throughout the poem links are made with ancient Brahmin castes or *bamunu* who were responsible for bringing ritual knowledge and novel forms of religiosity into Sri Lanka during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (K.M. De Silva, 2005, p. 123).

අමන සමහරු සිතති අඩුකෙට පනා නොගසනවට	ඉසේ
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අමන පැලඳුන් නොරිටු දුටු දුටු අඳින කුලයට	නිසිලෙසේ
පමණ තේරෙයි හො දට මියතත් බමුණුවට උන් සැක	කෙසේ

[7]We are extremely grateful to Emeritus Prof. Udaya Meddegama, Department of Sinhala, University of Peradeniya who translated the poem into English. The full version of the poem is reproduced in Appendix One.

Some persons look down on them as they do not wear combs on their heads
They walk clad in white scarves like Brahmins
Wearing weird ornaments according to diverse castes
Even if they die, they will know their status as Brahmins, there's no doubt

The fact that there were waves of migration from South India in earlier centuries is well established. Indeed, there are strong similarities between the Tamil drummer caste known as the Paraiyar and the Berava. The Sinhala word for drum is *bera* which has strong etymological connections with the Tamil word *parai*. It is believed that some of these early migrants would have been Brahmins bringing with them ritual knowledge relating to a new panoply of deities and demons. Yet, there are no Brahmin castes in Sinhalese society today. Obeyesekere makes the case for the transition of these early immigrants into the Goyigama caste as elites (Obeyesekere, 2015). At the time of our fieldwork, some Berava people held the view that they were the present-day heirs of the knowledge that these long-ago migrant Brahmins brought to Sri Lanka and perhaps even their direct descendants. Rather tantalizingly, Obeyesekere makes the point in his concluding remarks that Brahmins 'might have descended the caste ladder' and have links with drummers (Obeyesekere, 2015, p. 30). In defense of their claim to an earlier elevated status, some pointed out that rules about commensality and caste endogamy were not about them defiling the purity of others but, rather, preventing others defiling the purity that came with their Brahminic origins.

Given the backdrop of ongoing caste discrimination alongside internal conflicts and schisms it is hardly surprising that across the generations ambivalence towards their ritual inheritance has grown for many Berava youth. Some parents actively discouraged their sons from taking up hereditary professions. Sometimes it was the other way around with sons rejecting their parents' desire that they carry on the tradition. Leaving behind the occupational markers of caste might also be accompanied by name changes which removed any possible caste identification. Historically, Berava were not allowed to use names associated with the higher castes. Similarly, the family names (*vāsagama*) when spelt out in full might reveal an association with drumming or astrology. Such changes enabled a degree of caste anonymity which could facilitate upward social mobility through employment and/or education.

Berava Today

In this article we have drawn on our combined ethnographic experience of Berava families in the South of Sri Lanka to understand the emergence and consequences of the ambivalence expressed towards the caste. Our account documents a particular period in the island's history in which efforts to construct a post-independence, national identity took some distinctive turns. Berava as a caste group in Sinhala society have gradually managed to uplift their status and living conditions using opportunities offered by the Sri Lankan welfare state, including free education and opportunities arising from patronage politics and market mechanisms. These opportunities, however, have not benefited all members within the caste evenly and there are pockets where

poverty, landlessness, low human dignity, unemployment and poor living conditions in general exist side by side with continued discrimination, for example, in access to education. However, some members of the Berava caste have clearly benefited from the neo-liberalization of the economy post-1977 and the deployment of Sinhala cultural traditions as part of an ethno-nationalist rhetoric of renewal. The Berava caste, as the established and active carriers of the knowledge and skills that underpinned these traditions were inevitably drawn into this project. The ambivalence stems from the fact that their traditional role [community ritualists providing dancing, drumming and other ritual duties] and status [socially marginalized and discriminated against] was at odds with what they were now expected to provide. Over the decades that our account covers, a gradual bifurcation is evident. One direction of pull is for Berava performers to be drawn into aspects of performance that are formalized, elite and disconnected from their roots. The promotion of dance and drumming as mainstream subjects in education at all levels has played a major role in this process. It has provided significant career opportunities for some Berava ritualists. Whilst these opportunities are lucrative and carry status, they are inevitably selective and have the effect of distancing performers from their own communities. Similarly, tourism has provided markets for commoditized elements of ritual tradition in the form of cultural performances and the mass sale of 'devil dance' masks. Whereas ritual service as carried out by Berava, men were traditionally paid for with crops, goods and services, and sometimes also land, today ritualists are firmly part of the cash economy. A third area of demand for these commoditized aspects of culture is in the burgeoning media industry where ritual music and dance is often used to evoke nostalgic representation of village life and times.

There is however a pull in a very different direction, and one that takes later generations completely away from traditional activities. Separation from the traditions of the caste, whether by intent or necessity, is the experience of the majority of Berava young men. Essentially, Berava boys were trapped in a dilemma in that for many of them to reproduce the work of their fathers meant also to reproduce a problematic caste identity. Simpson, for example, makes a connection between a lingering social opprobrium and the desire to leave traditional professions in the 1970s and 80s; a strategy fraught with ambivalence. A clear effect of this move is that in the 1990s the younger generation experienced fewer stigmas than their forefathers. Some of the occupations that were moved into by recent generations involve skills developed as part of their caste inheritance. For example, occupations such as carpentry, masonry, bakery, art production, printing and tailoring may have benefited from the general skill sets that exist in the communities that they grew up in. Other destinations for employment have been the armed forces and particularly during the 30-year war fought against the Tamil Tigers. Garment factories, domestic service in gulf countries and menial security duties have also been important destinations for those choosing or compelled to move away from hereditary occupations.[8] From more recent anecdotal

[8]Similar arguments can be found in Seneviratne (1978), Silva (1992), Gunasekere (1994), Simpson (1996) Sorensen (1996) and Reed (2010).

evidence collected by the authors from the communities in which they worked, these latter occupations are the ones that the majority of Berava men and women have ended up in. Commenting on this shift in occupational focus, Jabbar notes that in the 'practice of hereditary caste occupations…it appears that the type of work and status available under the modern occupational hierarchy continues to reflect a caste dimension' (Jabbar, 2005, p. 16). However, on a visit in 2003 to the village where he had worked in the early 1980s, Simpson met the son of an important family of ritualists who had qualified as a doctor and recently married a woman of the same caste who was also a qualified doctor. Even a generation ago, such an achievement would have been unheard of.

What is apparent from this brief overview of recent trends in occupational activity is that changing socio-economic circumstances have resulted in intra-caste differentiation among Berava families. Whilst a small minority of Berava families have continued as carriers of their rich heritage, there has been a 'progressive backing away from hereditary, stigmatized occupations among the [Sinhala] lower castes… such that the vestiges of caste-based identity are rapidly being expunged' (Simpson, 1997, p. 44). In recent decades larger structural forces have also been in play. As Silva has argued, the abandonment of inherited caste occupation is part of a broader shift 'from caste to a high order of ethnicity' in the reckoning of identities (Silva, 1999, p. 202). The over-shadowing of caste-based identities by a more unified Sinhala and, indeed, Buddhist identity, has been accelerated during the thirty-five-year civil war that pitted the Sri Lankan state against the separatist aspirations of the Tamil Tigers. However, whilst caste identities may have been eclipsed by the rise of a powerful ethno-nationalism, the traces are not easily expunged and particularly for the service castes. As it was for previous generations of the Berava community, caste identity continues to be a source of ambivalence. It is one in which pride and the celebration of achievement often sit uncomfortably beside concealment and the negation of caste associations.

Appendix One

සීරු වෙස්නා දනන්ගේ කුල වනන කලක් වෙයි. ඒ බැවින් නෙක් ගුනෙන් යුත්
අපගෙ ගඳඹ කුලයන් නම් වනාලා දමන්ටත් අවසර දුනහොත් මේ උතුම් වූ ගොවින්ගෙන්

There will be a time for praising the caste of Seeruvesna people. Therefore to have praised the names of our Gandharva (musician castes), if we are permitted by these great Farmers.

ඔත් ගුණ පැවසුව තතු ඇති මෙම	පොත
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සත්තලි දෙක වටිනාකම	හැඟි යත

This book in which I state the true qualities
I will sell for seven sattali, no less
If those who can afford, bought it and read it
They will understand it is really worth seven sattali

මෙදිය තුළ පෙර පැවසූ මිනිසුන් එකම මිනිසුන් සැබවිනා
මෙදිය සම්මත නිරිදු කළ ලක් කිරිය හේතුව විලසිනා
යෙදිය කොටසක් වෙදහ දැනගත් බමුණු යයි නම් ගරුවනා
හදිය පව්කළ වැඩිය කොටසක් අදම කුලවල් වෙන් වුණා

It is really true; men in this world are the same
As the reason, the actions of the ancient kings of this Lanka
Some of them know of the Veda and were named respectable Brahmins,
Those who committed much sin, were segregated as low castes

යාග බමුණුය ගදඹ බමුනුය ඔවුන් නිසි නිසි නම් ලබා
යාග කෙරුමට ඇදුරු කොටසක් වෙනස්වුණු බව බලි අඹා
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යාග පිළිවෙල මෛලස පෙනුණිය පළමු පැවසිය මහ බඹා

Receiving appropriate names such as 'Brahmins of rituals, Brahmins of song and dance'
A special group of artists to perform *yaga* (rituals) by making *bali* images
They kept with them books on *yaga* and Vedanga
This is how the tradition of *yaga* evolved, first taught by Mahabrahma

මෙසිරිලක රජ පැමිණි නිරිඳෝ යාග බමුණන් ගෙන්නවා
අසිරි සලසන යාග කරුවා නැවත සතහට දන්නවා
විසිරි උන්ගෙන් බෝව පැවතෙන දැනුත් බමුනන් ඉන්නවා
අසිරිමත් උන් කවුද සොයමුය අඩහු සිත් තන්නවා

Kings of this Sri Lanka, having invited Brahmins for *yaga*
Having performed *yaga* and letting the people know
Some Brahmins still exist scattered, descending from them,
Let us trace, who they are, focusing our minds

ගොතන කිවියර තාල පද දැන නටන අයහට මිතුරුවා
කොතන ෙපළ හර උනත් පෙර කිව රැගෙන ගොස් බෙර රුසිලවා
තතන තනියන කියන නටනට ගැසී බෙරපද පතුරුවා
එතන සිට ලක තුමන් උන් හට නමක් බෙරවා පැවරුවා

The poet, skilled in the tunes and words making friends with the dancers,
Wherever there is a procession, going there carrying the drum happily
Beating the drum resounding '*tatana, tana, tana',* accompanying dance
Since then the kings of Lanka, awarded them the title of Berava

සුවන් මුනිවර පුදට ගොවිකුල දනන් හට උන් බෙර ගසා
අරන් ගැලවිය බෙරය පෙර සිට ඉසෙන් බුහුමන් කර යසා
නරන් හට සෙසු ගැසුවත් බෙර නොකා උන්ගෙන් කිසිලෙසා
අරන් ගැලවිය බෙරය දෙපයින් පටන් පෙර සිරිතක් ලෙසා

After playing the drum for the people of *govi* caste, as offering to the omniscient Buddha
They took off the drum over the head paying high respects
Even if they play the drum for other people, they would not eat anything from them
Following ancient traditions, took off the drum from the feet

අමන සමහරු සිතති අඹුකෙට පනා නොගසනවට ඉසේ
ගමන පමණකි උතුරු සළුවත් බමුණු සුදුවත් ඇඳ යසේ
අමන පැලඳුන් නොරිටු දුටු දුටු අඳින කුලයට නිසිලෙසේ
පමණ නේරෙයි හො දට මියතත් බමුණුවට උන් සැක කෙසේ

Some persons look down on them as they do not wear combs on their heads
They walk clad in white cloth like Brahmins
Wearing weird ornaments according to diverse castes
Even if they die, they will know their status as Brahmins, there's no doubt

පැත්ත කට නොව ඇත්ත පවසමි තරහ නොගනිව් නයිදෙලා
ගත්තු රජකම මෙරට නිරිඳෝ ආදිකළ කටයුතු බලා
සත්තමයි ඔය වංස අටවන අයට වැඩි අප ලොක්කලා
උත්ත මයි ගොවිකුලය සිරිලක අපෙන් උන්හට ගරුකළා

Without getting to a side I will tell the truth, people, do not be offended
Kings of this Lanka, ascended the throne, having seen the work of ancients
I swear! Our leaders are greater than those who boast of their caste
The Govi caste is the highest in Sri Lanka and we too paid respects to them

විජය රජකල පටන් ගොවිකුල මුනිඳු තනතුරු ලබමිනා
ගැටිය ලෙස කිත් පතල විය ලක උතුම් අයමැයි සැබවිනා
එජය දුම් දුට වතර ලැබූ අප අනගි ගම්පෙත් පෙර දිනා
රජය බමුණුය දෙකුල සෙසු නැත අපිත් නිරිඳුන් සිත්ගෙනා

People of the Govi caste, obtaining positions since the time of King Vijaya
Their glory spread in the world like a 'gotiya,' they are truly great
We provided water to the Holy Bodhi tree, rewarded with fields and lands
The two castes 'Royal' and 'Brahmin,' no other castes—we won the hearts of kings

සිටිය විලසට කුලය උසම්ටි ලෙසට බෙදුනිය පෙර කලා
හරිය පිළිවෙල බමුණු කුල ලෙස දැන් අපේ මේ පිළිවෙළා
ගිරිය සිඳිනට ගැසුවත් මොර අපට සමයයි නයිදෙලා
බැරිය සමවෙනු බිලිය අවුලා ලබ්බ ඉණ බැඳ අලිබලා

The castes is divided into low and high, according to their positions
Our present position is correct, as the Brahmin caste
Even if the goldsmiths and silversmiths (*nayide*) people scream until their throats crack
They cannot be made equal to us by wearing a gourd on the waist and guarding elephants

දැලෙන් බිලියෙන් මසුන් මැරුකල ඇසුත් නොපෙනෙයි සමහරු
තෙලින් කුරුරජ තුමන් ආවත් අපේ පිළිවෙළමයි ගරු
අලින් ගස්බැඳ කපන පොල් අතු මදින අයටත් සිත් යුරු
කලින් තිබූ පිළිවෙළක් නැත වෙන අපට වැඩි උන්ගෙන් ගරු

When some men catch fish with the net and hook, they go blind
Even if king Kuru* came from far, still our customs are the best
For those who polish coconut fronds they cut by tethering elephants on trees
No other greater way for them than what we had in the past
(*Kuru- name an ancient king found in Buddhist literature)

වනන් තව ඇත කොටස් වෙන වෙන බෙදුනු කටයුතු නිසි ලෙසා
ගනන් සත සහ නැකැත් සත දැන ගහ න් ගෙන් වන දෑ යසා
දනන් හට සෙත් යාග සමගින් වයන කර බෙර නද ගෙනා
පනම් ගෙන රැකි ඇදුරු කොටසක් බමුනු කුලයෙන් වේ යසා

There are more parts to describe, duly divided according tasks
Knowing the science of numbers and astrology, the effects of the planets
For the people with the *yaga* and to the accompaniment of the sound of drums
A kind of the artists maintained with gifts, descending from the Brahmin caste

සතර වෙද දැන ගඳඹ බමුණන් උතුම් ගොවිකුලයෙන් කකා
අතර තුරුවන් දනන්ගෙන් අඩු බතක් දුන්නොත් උන් නොකා
එතර කරමින් සියළු පිරිපත යාග කර මිනිසුන් රැකා
අතර දඹදිව බෝව පැවතුනි බෝග සම්පත් ලැබ නෙකා

Knowing four *Vedas*, Gandharva Brahmins, eating from the great Govi caste
If some food is given now and then for a low caste, not eating it
Putting an end to all disasters, performing *yaga* for protecting people
Existed in the Dambadiva mostly, receiving much wealth and crops

දැනට සිරිලක සුදුසු විලසට අඹා බලි ගහ රු ව යොදා
දිනට සුදු පිලි පැලඳ ගනිමින් සුරත ගගනය ගෙන නදා
කනට සුමුහිරි මගුල් වූ වවනෙන් යාග කර සත රෝ මුදා
බසට හැසිරෙන ඔවුන් බෙරවා නිමන් පැවතෙයි සිරිවිදා

At this time, making Bali images portraying the planets
Clad in pure white cloth, making the tinkling bells sound held in the hand
Doing the *yaga* uttering sweet words to the ear, relieving people from their diseases
with the words, they are known as Berava

මුතුන් මිත්තන් පටන්නොකඩව නැකැත් සත දැන සිටි නිසා
දෙතුන් විට දැන ගනිති සිහිකර සුදු ලෙසට බොල්ලන් තියා
කතුන් ගනුදෙනු සෑම නැකතුත් පැවසු හන්දා බලි තියා
උතුම් ගොවිකුල මැනිඳු පවසයි ඒයින් උන්හට නැක තියා

Since the time of ancestors continuously, they had known the science of astrology,
Remembering the science of numbers, two or three times, placing white shells
As they prescribed auspicious moments for marriages of women, offering *bali*
The great men of the Govi caste call them Nakatiya.

පතල ගොවිකුල දනන්ගෙන් බත් කන්නෙ පිරිසිදු පත්කොළේ
කොතල කෙටියෙන් කටට වත්කර බොන්නෙ පිරිසිදු වූ ජලේ
වතල තඹලෙරු පිහන් දුන්නත් අපිරිසිදුයයි පහකළේ
සිතල බැලුවොත් බමුණු පිලිවෙල තාම නැත උන් පහකලේ

From the famous people of the Govi caste, they consume rice from a leaf (*patkole)*
They drink water by pouring from clay-jug a (*kotale*) into the mouth
Fine copper plates are given; they put them away saying unclean
If you think about this, the ways of Brahmins they have not yet given up

ගසන එක බෙර නරක වැඩකැයි සිතති අඩුකුල දන රැසා
නසන ලද අපෙ මුනිදු කෙලෙසුන් අරාවුන් සඳ විදුරැසා
වසන සුරලොව ගදඹ දෙව්පුත් සමග නොයෙකුත් දෙවි රැසා
අසන හට ලෙස ෙගාසය පැතිරෙන ගැසුවෙ නැතිවද බෙරරැසා

The people of the low castes think playing drums as a bad thing
When our Buddha after destroying bad deeds (*keles*) occupying the crystal seat
Various kinds of deities in heaven living with the Gandharva Gods
Did they not play many drums making a loud noise for hearing?

පුවත නොදැනම උපත බෙරවා කෙරෙති අපහස සමහරු
පැවත ඒනපෙර සිටන් සිරිතල බමුණුමයි අප සත දැරූ
නැවත නැවතත් සොයා බැලුවෙමි ලොකු අයද අපහැර නැති යුරු
වසතහොත් අප මිසක් නොවලත උතුම් ගොවිකුල නොම සරු

Without knowing the history of the origin of Berava, some people ridicule
According to ancient traditions, we are Brahmins bearing the science
I have examined again and again, except us, there are no other 'big shots'
If we live with no regrets, the great Govi caste will not be thriving

කැමති රටකින් පැමිණ උතුමෙක් කලත් රජකම් ලකේ ගරු සරු
ඇමති යුවරජ ගනිති තනතුරු ලබති ගොවිකුල උතුම් වූ ගරු
නැමති ගරුතර උතුම් මැතිදුන් දැනුත් ඇත ලක තුලේ අතිගරු
ඒමැතිවරු හට උසස්වන්නට වේය නොවත් වේය නපුරු

If a powerful person came from another country and became king of Lanka
The respectable Govi caste receives the positions of minister and viceroy
There are even today such great persons highly respected in Lanka
Those gentlemen must be promoted, if not that will be wicked

මුනිදු හට පෙර කරපුසේවය උතුම් අයවල් මයි කළේ
පනිදු මුවලිදු දරන ගැබ වැඩ උන්න සඳ ඌමයි කළේ
දිනිදු කුලයුත් අනඳ තෙරිදුන් මුනිදු හට සේවය කලේ
ගනිදු සිව් අත් සුරිදු සේවය සකස් පුර දොර දි කලේ

In the past only the noble persons served the Buddha
While Buddha sat in the coils of the Mucalinda cobra, he himself served Buddha
Venerable Ananda, born in the Solar clan, himself attended upon Buddha
Gods Ganesh, Sakra and Brahma served Buddha at the gate of the city of Sankassa

කෙරෙන පිළිවෙල මෙ අපි දැන් බලි රජුන් බමුණන් කල ලෙ සා
පොරණ සිරිලක විසුව පඬුවස් රජුට පැමිණුනි දිවි දොසා
හරන ලෙස සෙත් යාග කල එම මලලරජු දිවි දොස නසා
උරන නොව මෙම කරුණු පහදා දෙමැයි දැනගනු නොවලසා

The system of our Bali performances, in the same way as ancient kings and Brahmins
In the past, King Panduvas of Lanka was afflicted with the evil effects of perjury (*divi dos)*
The King of Malala country, performed the *yaga*; to remove these effects
I will explain these matters, kindly listen, do not take offence.

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